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SUBJECT: UBCV MONKS VISIT HOSPITALIZED PATRIARCH IN HCMC: AN UNPRECEDENTED GATHERING

REF: HCMC 1089; B) HCMC 1090

¶1. (SBU) On October 2 we spoke with Thich Vien Dinh, a senior HCMC-based member of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV). He told us that on September 29, UBCV General Secretary Thich Quang Do led a delegation of 20 senior UBCV monks to visit hospitalized UBCV Patriarch Thich Huyen Quang. The delegation included Thich Thien Hanh, the senior UBCV monk from Thua Thien Hue province. The one-hour visit marked the first time that senior UBCV monks were able to meet since their attempt to hold a general organizational conference in October 2003. Dinh asserted that, the monks did not discuss church affairs, at least at the hospital. He would not discuss on the phone the content of other meetings that the senior UBCV monks had in HCMC.

¶2. (SBU) Although Thich Thien Hanh and other senior UBCV monks technically remain under "pagoda arrest," none sought permission from authorities to travel to HCMC. And none were stopped or harassed along the way, despite tight surveillance. Thich Thien Hanh was enroute back to Hue on October 2. Dinh said that Thich Thien Hanh had traveled to Binh Dinh province from Hue shortly after Thich Huyen Quang was first hospitalized. In addition to the group meeting, Thich Quang Do and Thich Vien Dinh have had daily private meetings with Thich Huyen Quang without government interference. According to Dinh, Thich Huyen Quang's condition has "stabilized." Should he die, however, Thich Quang Do has a copy of the will which lays out succession and administrative plans for the Church.

¶3. (SBU) Dinh said that the UBCV had arranged to transfer the ailing patriarch from Cho Ray hospital to the private Franco-Viet hospital on October 1. According to Dinh, the UBCV preferred to treat the patriarch at a private institution, arguing that the care would be better and the controls on access less restrictive. Dinh said that administrators at HCMC's Cho Ray Hospital tried to prevent the transfer, saying they could not process the paperwork over the weekend.

¶4. (SBU) Comment: Both Thich Quang Do and Thich Huyen Quang have told us separately that the GVN would never allow them to meet. Huyen Quang told Quang Do that they would meet in heaven but not before. Dinh pointed to Vietnam's pending WTO accession, the APEC Leaders' Summit and the visit of President Bush to explain why authorities allowed the unprecedented gathering of UBCV monks. Although Dinh is almost certainly correct, there may be more to the story. Fear of a local "Buddhist backlash" should the government be perceived as denying access to the Patriarch on his deathbed may have been another factor in the authorities' calculations. Also, as reported reftel, just before Thich Huyen Quang was initially hospitalized he was visited by a senior Ministry of Public Security official for a "courtesy call." We note that WTO and

Presidential visit considerations have not deterred authorities from harassing and arresting other political activists throughout the HCMC consular district (ref b). End Comment.

WINNICK